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A Key Concept in Effective School Development: Strategic Leadership

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Abstract: Effective school development is a project which links school effectiveness and school development. Research studies have shown that obtaining positive results in effective school development depends on the school's strategy creation capacity (Leithwood, & Hopkins, 2006). Considering the fact that 21st century is uncertainty, risks and chaos; it will be understood better how important it is to develop strategies and for the administration to undertake leadership roles. Therefore, it might be said that the leadership required by the organisations of the third millennium is strategic leadership. This current research aims at handling the dynamics of effective school development within the framework of strategic leadership and thus evaluating and analysing them.

Introduction

Effective school development is a project which links school effectiveness and school development. The project, which contributes positively to students' achievement, was implemented in the 1988-2001 period; and many EU countries such as Belgium, England, Finland, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain participated in the project (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005). Afterwards, similarities and differences between countries in terms of effective school development were discussed and comparisons were made. Because of the major differences between countries, especially in their educational context, it was virtually impossible to draw a general model that would act as an explanation of success or failure of improvement efforts and be applicable in all ESI (Effective School Improvement) countries.

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Purpose of The Study

This current research aims at handling the dynamics of effective school development within the framework of strategic leadership and thus evaluating and analysing them.

Effective School Development

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The framework shows that the concept of an improving school is firmly embedded in the educational context of a country. School improvement can never be studied separately from that educational context. The

improving school is always confronted with contextual concepts such as pressure to improve, resources for improvement, and educational goals (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005):

1. Pressure To Improve: Ideally, schools (as organizational units) define their own improvement needs, design their improvement efforts, and evaluate them as to whether those needs have been met. Theories about schools as learning organizations often depict this kind of improvement (i.e. learning). In practice, however, schools often need some form of external pressure to start improving. The research identified four factors which constitute pressure to improve: market mechanisms, external evaluation and accountability, external agents and the participation of society in education and societal changes.

2. Resources Support For Improvement: In order to make school improvement effective, the resources made available by the educational context are very important. Without these, schools are likely to experience difficulties in their improvement efforts. Resources can be material, but there are also other resources that may be essential for effective school improvement. The identified factors that together constitute the concept of resources are: autonomy granted to schools, financial resources and favourable daily working conditions for teachers and schools, and local support.

3. Educational Goals: Although schools tend to set specific goals for improvement, the context generally sets the wider educational goals and all improvement efforts have to fit within these. For some countries, these nationally set goals form a broad framework, whereas others they are detailed and prescriptive.

Effective School Improvement Process

Hargreaves & Hopkins (1991), outline a five-staged improvement process: getting started, conducting an audit of the schools strengths and weaknesses, setting priorities and targets, implementation or putting the plans in place, and evaluating the success of the plans and their implementation.

1. The First Stage: The first stage in ESIP involves activities and decisions leading to the adoption or beginning of the planning process. In some cases, the decision to engage in school developmental or improvement planning is mandated by a senior level of government. Communications with stakeholders in the school community about the planning process is typically part of this stage. In many schools, a group or several teams are organized to participate in the planning process. Training in the process of school development planning may be undertaken.

2. Conducting An Audit Of The Schools Strengths and Weaknesses: Schools examine their strengths and weakness using achievement data and other pertinent information. A plan is established according to a framework that requires action to be taken over a period of time, usually 1 to 5 years.

3. Setting Priorities and Targets: During the "Design" stage, schools determine what should be included in their plan by incorporating requirements from district and senior levels of government with school needs and priorities.

4. Implementation or Putting The Plans: Plans are carried out at the classroom and school level. Responsibilities for implementation may be shared by the principal, teachers, school-based decision-making groups (or improvement teams), and other stakeholders. Monitoring is sometimes viewed as part of the implementation stage and is carried out for formative purposes. Monitoring the effects of the plan and the processes used for its implementation allows schools to see where they are succeeding or where they may need to make adjustments during the implementation process.

5. Evaluating The Success Of The Plans: Evaluation is sometimes undertaken by external bodies and by the school itself. Evaluation also may be less formal and limited to school personnel discussing progress towards goals as they have experienced it. Reporting on the results of the planning process within the school community or beyond to districts or governments is also a feature of the evaluation phase in some settings.

In addition to the stages typically associated with ESIP, our review uncovered considerable amounts of evidence of the factors determining the outcomes of school improvement processes, for example, the role principal, the teacher teams, district support and the like.

Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership is a critical component in the effective development of schools. The key foci for those who led schools in the last two decades, in many countries, have been school effectiveness and school improvement. The emphasis now is shifting to focus on how short-term improvements can become sustainable. This study will put forward the view that renewed attention needs to be paid to the strategic dimension of leadership to ensure this sustainability. We have worked to isolate the strategic dimension of leadership by using two major categories that emerge from the research, which are: (1) what strategic leader do, and (2) characteristics that strategic leaders display.

What Strategic Leaders Do?

Davies & Davies (2006) revealed that those strategic leaders involve themselves in five key activities: Direction setting, translating strategy into action, enabling the staff to develop and deliver the strategy, determining effective intervention points and developing strategic capabilities.

1. Direction Setting: Strategic leaders are concerned with not just managing the now but setting up a framework of where the organization needs to be in the future, setting a direction for the organization. School leaders articulate the definition of the organizations moral purpose, which can be considered as “why we do what we do”. The values that underpin this moral purpose are linked to the vision considering “where we want to be and what sort of organization we want to be in the future”.

2. Translating Strategy into Action: The articulation of the strategy can take place in three ways: oral, written and structural. Oral articulation is the way leaders communicate, through strategic conversations the strategic purpose and direction of the organization. Written articulations are the formal statements and plans that are clearly distinguishable from operational short-term plans. Structural articulation refers to the organizational infrastructure that supports and develops the strategic approach, for example, setting up futures or strategy meetings separate from the cycle of operational meetings.

3. Enabling the Staff to Develop and Deliver the Strategy: Wilson (1997), states “organizational change has two principal aspects-change in mission and strategy and change in culture and behaviour. This could be developed as: it is impossible fundamentally to change mission and strategy without changing culture and behaviour. Key to this is changing the mind-set and the behaviour of the people within the organization.

4. Determining Effective Intervention Points: The leadership challenge of *when* to make a significant strategic change is as critical to success as choosing *what* strategic change to make. When individuals in the organization are ready for change, when the organization needs the change, and when the external constraints and conditions force the change all have to be balanced one against the other.

5. Developing Strategic Capabilities: Strategic capabilities relate to the longer-term fundamental attributes of an organization rather than shorter-term specific skills. This capability building approach is a central factor in a strategically focused school and is one of the key activities of a strategic leader.

Characteristics Strategic Leaders Display

The NCSL (National College for School Leadership) research established significant characteristics of strategic leaders in schools. These were identified in the research as follows (Davies & Davies 2006):

- Strategic leaders have a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present,
- Strategic leaders prioritize their own strategic thinking and learning,
- Strategic leaders create mental models to frame their own understanding and practice,
- Strategic leaders have powerful personal and professional networks.

1. Strategic Leaders Have a Dissatisfaction or Restlessness with the Present: This restlessness involves living the reality of having to manage the current situation and not being able to change it for some time until greater capacity and capability has been built.

2. Strategic Leaders Prioritize Their Own Strategic Thinking and Learning: A very significant number of the school leaders participating in the study referred to their own learning and stressed the importance of new knowledge to promote the strategic direction for the school.

3. Strategic Leaders Create Mental Models to Frame Their Own Understanding and Practice: One of the ways that school leaders can make of complexity is to create mental models and framework to aid their understanding.

4. Strategic Leaders Have Powerful Personal and Professional Networks: Strategic leaders constantly scan their environment locally, regionally and internationally. They seek both to develop new ideas and to benchmark current practice in their own schools with those of colleagues in the wider educational community. The ability to develop personal and professional networks that provide alternative perspectives from those prevalent in their immediate educational environment is a key skill of strategic leaders.

Conclusion

It is well known that leadership plays a key role in school improvement and school effectiveness. The evidence from the international literature demonstrates that effective leaders exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of the students in most countries (Muijs et al., 2004).

Research studies have shown that obtaining positive results in effective school development depends on the school's strategy creation capacity (Leithwood & Hopkins, 2006). Considering the fact that 21st century is uncertainty, risks and chaos; it will be understood better how important it is to develop strategies and for the

administration to undertake leadership roles. Therefore, it might be said that the leadership required by the organisations of the third millenium is strategic leadership. With schools under short-term pressure to deliver on the standards agenda the need also to build strategic processes to ensure longer-term success and sustainability gathers increased importance.

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